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Bygone era when army captains were a rare breed

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WHEN Malaysia was part of the British Empire before the Second World War the highest military rank a Malay could achieve was that of Captain. And that too in the Malay Volunteer Reserve. Malaysia's regular army was established in 1936 called the Malay Regiment at Port Dickson.

In the old days, the Malay Rulers were very sparing in conferring Datukships. Generally the title would go to Territorial Chiefs, palace officials and the Chief Minister only. So for lesser mortals to be made a Captain was like being made a Datuk or Tan Sri today, only that there were so few of them.

My grandfather was one of them. He was Capt Noor Mohamed Hashim but was more popularly known as Capt Hashim. He was one of the earliest Malays to be appointed to the elite Malayan Civil Service. There was some sort of a quota system, only one appointee at a time from each of the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements. He retired in 1935 from the M.C.S. and was appointed a member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. He was conferred the Imperial Service Order (I.S.O.) by the King of England. In spite of these prestigious appointments, people remember him as Captain Hashim. What was clear to me, grandfather ran the house like a military establishment. He was a strict disciplinarian. Everything had to be precise, neat, smart and well polished including the way we dressed.

On one occasion we were on our way to attend the King's birthday parade in Singapore. The traffic had come to a halt and our car had come alongside an open military truck carrying soldiers of the Malay Regiment. It was raining and the soldiers were shivering from the cold. Grandfather opened the car window and shouted: "Soldiers, look like soldiers", that is that they should be tough-looking and not shiver in the rain!

Perhaps the most pleasant Captain I knew after the war was Capt Raja Lope of the Malay Regiment. During his posting in Kota Baru a fight broke out between the army and the police culminating in the army capturing the police barracks of the Central Police Station and laying it under siege. The dispute between the two forces had arisen as the men wanted to dance with the same ronggeng girls at the same time. The dancing girls were not exactly Helens of Troy whose face launched a thousand ships but as both the soldiers and policemen were from outside Kelantan any woman would do. Capt Raja Lope worked a compromise with Supt Wan Ibrahim of the police. The Biaritz Park was to be out-of-bounds to either side an alternate nights! On Merdeka, Raja Lope was to become the first A.D.C to the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

The most famous Captain after the war was surely Capt Hussein Onn. He had joined the Military Academy in Dehra Dun, India before the war. During the war he was commissioned into the Indian Army and saw action in the African Campaign.

He was known as Capt Hussein even when he joined Tun Abdul Razak's Cabinet. He was to succeed Tun Abdul Razak as Prime Minister. By then he had become a Datuk and on his retirement was made a Tun.

His military training characterised him even after he became Prime Minister. The story is told that a few days after he had presided over his first Cabinet Meeting as Prime Minister, a Minister asked him which of two ways a Cabinet decision should be implemented. The PM was reported to have said that as the Minister he should be capable of making such a decision but if he could not do so, he (the PM) would be happy to accept the

Minister's resignation.

The first Malay to be made a General was Tunku Osman Jiwa after independence. The question arose as to what should be the pay of a general as we never had to pay a general before. The story is told that the Cabinet discussion went something like this:

Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister: How much should we pay a general?

Encik Khir Johari, Education Minister: It has to be more than what we pay a Captain.

Tunku: How much do we pay Captains?

Khir: RM3,000.

Tunku to Tun Abdul Razak, the Defence Minister: Is that what we pay Captains?

Tun Abdul Razak: This is the first time I have heard of this.

Tunku to Khir: Where did you get this figure?

Khir, pointing to Capt Abdul Hamid Khan, the Welfare Minister: This Captain is paid RM3,000.

That of course was the pay of a Minister at the time.

Capt Abdul Hamid Khan was about the last Captain of colonial vintage.

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